

Letter from
the Secretary of War
to the Chairman of
the Committee
of Military Affairs
October 27, 1814

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LETTER

FROM

THE SECRETARY OF WAR,

TO

THE CHAIRMAN

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON MILITARY AFFAIRS,

UPON THE

SUBJECT OF THE DEFECTS EXISTING

IN THE PRESENT

MILITARY ESTABLISHMENT.

OCTOBER 27, 1814.

Laid before the house by the chairman of the committee,
and ordered to be printed.

WASHINGTON:

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1814.

DEPARTMENT OF WAR,

October 17, 1814.

SIR,

THE great importance of the subject, and the other duties of the department, which could not fail to be very sensibly felt at so interesting a period, by a person who had just taken charge of it, are my apology for not answering your letter of the 24th of September at an earlier day, on the defects of the present military establishment.

Due consideration has been bestowed on the subject matter of that letter, and I have now the honor to submit to the committee the following report :

1st. That the present military establishment, amounting to 62,448 men, be preserved and made complete, and that the most efficient means, authorized by the constitution, and consistent with the equal rights of our fellow citizens, be adopted, to fill the ranks, and with the least possible delay.

2d. That a permanent force, consisting of at least 40,000 men in addition to the present military establishment, be raised for the defence of our cities and frontiers, under an engagement by the executive with each corps, that it shall be employed in that service within certain specified limits, and that a proportional augmentation of general officers of each grade, and other staff, be provided for.

3d. That the corps of engineers be enlarged.

4th. That the ordnance department be amended.

Respecting the enlargement of the corps of engineers, I shall submit hereafter a more detailed communication.

For the proposed amendment of the ordnance department, I submit a report from the senior officer in that department now in this city, which is approved.

I shall be ready and happy to communicate such farther remarks and details on these subjects as the committee may desire, and shall request permission to suggest hereafter the result of further attention to and reflection on our military establishment generally, should any thing occur which may be deemed worthy its attention.

I have the honor to be,

With great respect,

Your very obedient servant,

JAMES MONROE.

Honorable George M. Troup,

*Chairman of the committee of the house
of representatives on military affairs*

EXPLANATORY OBSERVATIONS.

IN providing a force necessary to bring this war to a happy termination, the nature of the crisis in which we are involved, and the extent of its dangers, claim particular attention. If the means are not fully adequate to the end, discomfiture must inevitably ensue.

It may be fairly presumed, that it is the object of the British government, by striking at the principal sources of our prosperity, to diminish the importance, if not to destroy the political existence of the United States. If any doubt remained on this subject, it has been completely removed by the despatches from our ministers at Ghent, which were lately laid before Congress.

A nation contending for its existence against an enemy powerful by land and sea, favored in a peculiar manner by extraordinary events, must make great exertions, and suffer great sacrifices. Forced to contend again for our liberties and independence, we are called on for a display of all the patriotism, which distinguished our fellow citizens in their first great struggle. It may be fairly concluded, that if the United States sacrifice any right, or make any dishonorable concession to the demands of the British government, the spirit of the nation will be broken, and the foundations of their union and independence shaken. The United States must relinquish no right, or perish in the struggle. There is no intermediate ground to rest on. A concession on one point, leads directly to the surrender of every other. The result of the contest cannot be doubtful. The highest confidence is entertained that the stronger the pressure, and the greater the danger, the more firm and vigorous will be the resistance, and the more successful and glorious the result.

It is the avowed purpose of the enemy to lay waste and destroy our cities and villages, and to desolate our coast, of which examples have already been afforded. It is evidently his intention to press the war along the whole extent of our seaboard, in the hope of exhausting equally the spirits of the people, and the national resources. There is also reason to presume, that it is his intention to press the war from Canada on the adjoining states, while attempts are made on the city of New York, and other important points, with a view to the vain project of dismemberment or subjugation. It may be inferred likewise to be a part of the scheme, to continue to invade this part of the union, while a separate force attacks the state of Louisiana, in the hope of taking possession of the city of New Orleans, and of the mouth of the Mississippi, that great inlet and key to the commerce of all that portion of the United States lying westward of the Alleghany mountains. The peace in Europe having given to the enemy a large disposable force, has essentially favored these objects.

The advantage which a great naval superiority gives to the enemy, by enabling him to move troops from one quarter to another, from Maine to the Mississippi, a coast of two thousand miles extent, is very considerable. Even a small force moved in this manner for the purposes avowed by the British commanders, cannot fail to be sensibly felt, more especially by those who are most exposed to it. It is obvious, that if the militia are to be relied on principally for the defence of our cities and coasts against these predatory and desolating incursions, wherever they may be made, that by interfering with their ordinary pursuits of industry, it must be attended with serious interruption and loss to them, and injury to the public, while it greatly increases the expense. It is an object, therefore, of the highest importance, to provide a regular force, with the means of transporting it from one quarter to another along our coast,

thereby following the movements of the enemy with the greatest possible rapidity, and repelling the attack wherever it may be made. These remarks are equally true as to the militia service generally under the present organization of the militia, and the short terms of service prescribed by law. It may be stated with confidence, that at least three times the force in militia has been employed at our principal cities, along the coast, and on the frontier, in marching to and returning thence, that would have been necessary in regular troops; and that the expense attending it has been more than proportionably augmented, from the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of preserving the same degree of system in the militia as in the regular service.

But it will not be sufficient to repel these predatory and desolating incursions. To bring the war to an honorable termination, we must not be contented with defending ourselves. Different feelings must be touched and apprehensions excited in the British government. By pushing the war into Canada, we secure the friendship of the Indian tribes, and command their services; otherwise to be turned by the enemy against us: we relieve the coast from the desolation which is intended for it, and we keep in our hands a safe pledge for an honorable peace.

It follows, from this view of the subject, that it will be necessary to bring into the field, next campaign, not less than 100,000 regular troops. Such a force, aided, in extraordinary emergencies, by volunteers and the militia, will place us above all inquietude as to the final result of this contest. It will fix, on a solid and imperishable foundation, our union and independence; on which the liberties and happiness of our fellow citizens so essentially depend. It will secure to the United States an early and advantageous peace. It will arrest, in the further prosecution of the war, the desolation of our cities and our coast, by enabling us to retort on the enemy those

calamities which our citizens have been already doomed to suffer; a resort which self defence alone, and a sacred regard for the rights and honor of the nation, could induce the United States to adopt.

The return of the regular force now in service, laid before you, will shew how many men will be necessary to fill the present corps; and the return of the numerical force of the present military establishment, will shew how many are required to complete it to the number proposed. The next and most important inquiry is, how shall these men be raised? Under existing circumstances, it is evident that the most prompt and efficient mode that can be devised, consistent with the equal rights of every citizen, ought to be adopted. The following plans are respectfully submitted to the consideration of the committee. Being distinct in their nature, I will present each separately, with the considerations applicable to it.

FIRST PLAN.

Let the free male population of the United States, between 18 and 45 years, be formed into classes of 100 men each, and let each class furnish four men for the war, within 30 days after the classification, and replace them in the event of casualty.

The classification to be formed with a view to the equal distribution of property among the several classes.

If any class fails to provide the men required of it, within the time specified, they shall be raised by draft on the whole class: any person thus drafted being allowed to furnish a substitute.

The present bounty in land to be allowed to each recruit, and the present bounty in money, which is paid to each recruit by the United States, to be paid to each draft by all the inhabitants within the precinct of the class, within which the draft may be made, equally, according to the value of the property

which they may respectively possess: and if such bounty be not paid within days, the same to be levied on all the taxable property of the said inhabitants. And in like manner, the bounty, whatever it may be, which may be employed in raising a recruit, to avoid a draft, to be assessed on the taxable property of the whole precinct.

The recruits to be delivered over to the recruiting officer in each district, to be marched to such places of general rendezvous as may be designated by the department of war.

That this plan will be efficient, cannot be doubted. It is evident, that the men contemplated may soon be raised by it. Three modes occur, by which it may be carried into effect. 1st. By placing the execution of it in the hands of the county courts throughout the United States. 2d. By relying on the militia officers in each county. 3d. By appointing particular persons in each county for that purpose. It is believed that either of these modes would be found adequate.

Nor does there appear to be any well founded objection to the right in Congress to adopt this plan, or to its equality in its application to our fellow citizens individually. Congress have a right, by the constitution, to raise regular armies, and no restraint is imposed in the exercise of it, except in the provisions which are intended to guard generally against the abuse of power, with none of which does this plan interfere. It is proposed, that it shall operate on all alike, that none shall be exempted from it except the chief magistrate of the United States, and the governors of the several states.

It would be absurd to suppose that Congress could not carry this power into effect, otherwise than by accepting the voluntary service of individuals. It might happen that an army could not be raised in that mode, whence the power would have been granted in vain. The safety of the state might depend on

such an army. Long continued invasions conducted by regular well disciplined troops, can best be repelled by troops kept constantly in the field, and equally well disciplined. Courage in an army is in a great measure mechanical. A small body well trained, accustomed to action, gallantly led on, often breaks three or four times the number of more respectable and more brave, but raw and undisciplined troops. The sense of danger is diminished by frequent exposure to it without harm; and confidence, even in the timid, is inspired by a knowledge that reliance may be placed on others, which can grow up only by service together. The grant of power to Congress to raise armies was made with a knowledge of all these circumstances, and with the intention that it should take effect. The framers of the constitution, and the states who ratified it, knew the advantage which an enemy might have over us, by regular forces, and intended to place their country on an equal footing.

The idea that the United States cannot raise a regular army in any other mode than by accepting the voluntary service of individuals, is believed to be repugnant to the uniform construction of all grants of power, and equally so to the first principles and leading objects of the federal compact. An unqualified grant of power gives the means necessary to carry it into effect. This is an universal maxim which admits of no exception. Equally true is it that the conservation of the state is a duty paramount to all others. The commonwealth has a right to the service of all its citizens, or rather, the citizens composing the commonwealth have a right collectively and individually to the service of each other, to repel any danger which may be menaced. The manner in which the service is to be apportioned among the citizens, and rendered by them, are objects of legislation. All that is to be dreaded in such case, is, the abuse of power, and happily our constitution has provided ample security against that evil.

In support of this right in Congress, the militia service affords a conclusive proof and striking example. The organization of the militia is an act of public authority, not a voluntary association. The service required must be performed by all, under penalties which delinquents pay. The generous and patriotic perform them cheerfully. In the alacrity with which the call of the government has been obeyed, and the cheerfulness with which the service has been performed throughout the United States by the great body of the militia, there is abundant cause to rejoice in the strength of our republican institutions, and in the virtue of the people.

The plan proposed is not more compulsive than the militia service, while it is free from most of the objections to it. The militia service calls from home for long terms whole districts of country. None can elude the call. Few can avoid the service, and those who do are compelled to pay great sums for substitutes. This plan fixes on no one personally, and opens to all who chuse it a chance of declining the service. It is a principal object of this plan to engage in the defence of the state the unmarried and youthful, who can best defend it and best be spared, and to secure to those who render this important service, an adequate compensation from the voluntary contribution of the more wealthy in every class.—Great confidence is entertained that such contribution will be made in time to avoid a draft. Indeed it is believed to be the necessary and inevitable tendency of this plan to produce that effect.

The limited power which the United States have in organizing the militia may be urged as an argument against their right to raise regular troops in the mode proposed. If any argument could be drawn from that circumstance, I should suppose that it would be in favor of an opposite conclusion. The power of the United States over the militia has been limited, and that for raising regular armies granted

without limitation. There was, doubtless, some object in this arrangement. The fair inference seems to be, that it was made on great consideration; that the limitation in the first instance was intentional, the consequence of the unqualified grant in the second.

But it is said that by drawing the men from the militia service into the regular army, and putting them under regular officers, you violate a principle of the constitution which provides that the militia shall be commanded by their own officers. If this was the fact the conclusion would follow. But it is not the fact. The men are not drawn from the militia, but from the population of the country: when they enlist voluntarily, it is not as militia men that they act, but as citizens. If they are drafted it must be in the same sense. In both instances they are enrolled in the militia corps, but that, as is presumed, cannot prevent the voluntary act in the one instance, or the compulsive in the other. The whole population of the United States within certain ages belong to these corps. If the United States could not form regular armies from them they could raise none.

In proposing a draft as one of the modes of raising men in case of actual necessity, in the present great emergency of the country, I have thought it my duty to examine such objections to it as occurred, particularly those of a constitutional nature. It is from my sacred regard for the principles of our constitution that I have ventured to trouble the committee with any remarks on this part of the subject.

Should it appear that this mode of raising recruits was justly objectionable on account of the tax on property, from difficulties which may be apprehended in the execution, or from other causes, it may be advisable to decline the tax, and for the government to pay the whole bounty.

In this case it is proposed that in lieu of the present bounty, the sum of fifty dollars be allowed to each recruit or draft at the time of his engagement,

and one hundred acres of land in addition to the present bounty in land for every year that the war may continue.

It is impossible to state with mathematical accuracy the number which will be raised by the ratio of 4 to 100 or 1 to 25, nor is it necessary. It is probable that it will be rather more than sufficient to fill the present corps. The extra number, in that case, may form a part of the local force in contemplation, a power to that effect being given to the president.

No radical change in the present military establishment is proposed. Should any modification be found necessary, on further consideration, it will form the subject of a separate communication. It is thought advisable in general to preserve the corps in their present form, and to fill them with new recruits in the manner stated. All these corps have already seen service, and many of them acquired in active scenes much experience and useful knowledge. By preserving them in their present form and under their present officers, and filling them with new recruits, the improvement of the latter will be rapid. In two or three months it will be difficult to distinguish between the new and old levies.

The additional force to be provided amounts to 40,000 men. Of this it is proposed that local corps be raised, to consist partly of infantry, partly of mounted men and and partly of artillery. There is reason to believe that such corps may be raised in the principal cities, and even on the frontier, to serve for the war, under an engagement as to the limit beyond which they should not be carried. Every able bodied citizen is willing and ready to fight for his home, his family and his country, when invaded. Of this we have seen, in the present year, the most honorable and gratifying proofs. It does not suit all, however, to go great distances from home. This generous and patriotic spirit may be taken advantage of, under proper arrangements, with the happiest effect

to the country, and without essential inconvenience to the parties.

The officers who may be appointed to command these corps, should be charged with recruiting them. Local defence being their sole object, it may be presumed that the corps will soon be raised. Patriotism alone will furnish a very powerful motive. It seems reasonable, however, that some recompence should be made to those who relieve others from the burthen : one hundred acres of land and fifty dollars to each recruit will, it is presumed, be deemed sufficient.

It is proposed that this additional force shall form a part of any plan that may be adopted.

SECOND PLAN.

This plan consists of a classification of the militia, and the extension of their terms of service.

Let the whole militia of the United States be divided into the following classes, viz :

All free male persons capable of service, between the ages of 18 and 25, into one class : all those between the ages of 25 and 32 into another class, and those between 32 and 45 into a third class.

It is proposed also that the president shall have power to call into the service any portion of either of these classes which in his judgment the exigencies of the country may require, to remain in service two years, from the time each corps shall be assembled at the appointed place of rendezvous.

It is believed that a shorter term than two years would not give to these corps the efficiency in military operations that is desired, and deemed indispensable, nor avoid the evils that are so sensibly felt, and generally complained of, under the present arrangement. It requires two campaigns to make a complete soldier, especially where the corps, officers and men are alike raw and inexperienced. In the interim, the numbers must be multiplied to supply the defect of

discipline. And it requires the extension of the term of service, to avoid the additional proportional augmentation of having so many in the field at the same time, in marching to the frontier and returning from it. The inconvenience to the parties, and loss to the community in other respects, need not be repeated. It is proper to add only, that if substitutes are allowed in this service it must put an end to the recruiting of men for the regular army, especially the old corps. Of the justice of this remark what has occurred in the present year has furnished full proof. It follows that if this plan is adopted, the militia must be relied on principally, if not altogether, in the further prosecution of the war.

The additional force for local service, amounting to forty thousand men, will likewise form a part, as already observed, of this plan.

THIRD PLAN.

It is proposed to exempt every five men from militia service, who shall find one to serve for the war. It is probable that some recruits might be raised in this mode, in most or all the states. But it is apprehended that it would prevent recruiting in every other mode, by the high bounty which some of the wealthy might give. The consequence would probably be very injurious, as it is not believed that any great number could be raised in this mode.

FOURTH PLAN.

Should all the preceding plans be found objectionable, it remains that the present system of recruiting be adhered to, with an augmentation of the bounty in land. Should this be preferred, it is advised that in addition to the 160 acres of land now given, 100 be allowed annually for every year while the war lasts.

These plans are thought more deserving the attention of the committee than any that have occurred. The first, for the reasons stated, is preferred. It is believed that it will be found more efficient against the enemy, less expensive to the public, and less burthensome on our fellow citizens.

It has likewise the venerable sanction of our revolution. In that great struggle resort was had to this expedient for filling the ranks of our regular army, and with decisive effect.

It is not intended by these remarks, should the first plan be adopted, to dispense altogether with the service of the militia. Although the principal burthen of the war may thereby be taken from the militia, reliance must still be placed on them for important aids, especially in cases of sudden invasion. For this purpose it will still be adviseable that the men be classed according to age, and that their term of service be prolonged. Even should this plan be attended with all the advantages expected of it, such an arrangement could not fail to produce the happiest effect. The proof which it would afford of the impregnable strength of the country, of the patient virtue, and invincible spirit of the people, would admonish the enemy, how vain and fruitless his invasions must be, and might dispose him to a speedy, just and honorable peace. Of the very important services already rendered by the militia, even under the present organization, too much cannot be said.

If the United States make the exertion which is proposed, it is probable that the contest will soon be at an end. It cannot be doubted that it is in their power to expel the British forces from this continent, should the British government, by persevering in its unjust demands, make that an object with the American people. Against our united and vigorous efforts, the resistance of the enemy will soon become light and feeble. Success in every fair and honorable claim, is within our easy grasp. And surely the

United States have every possible inducement to make the effort necessary to secure it. I should insult the understanding and wound the feelings of the committee, if I touched on the calamities incident to defeat. Dangers which are remote and can never be realized, excite no alarm with a gallant and generous people. But the advantages of success have a fair claim to their deliberate consideration. The effort we have already made has attracted the attention, and extorted the praise of other nations. Already have most of the absurd theories and idle speculations on our system of government been refuted, and put down. We are now felt and respected as a power, and it is the dread which the enemy entertain of our resources and growing importance, that has induced him to push the war against us, after its professed objects had ceased. Success by the discomfiture of his schemes, and the attainment of an honorable peace, will place the United States on higher ground, in the opinion of the world, than they have held at any former period. In future wars, their commerce will be permitted to take its lawful range unmolested. Their remonstrances to foreign governments will not again be put aside, unheeded. Few will be presented, because there will seldom be occasion for them. Our union, founded on interest and affection, will have acquired new strength by the proof it will have afforded, of the important advantages attending it. Respected abroad and happy at home, the United States will have accomplished the great objects, for which they have so long contended. As a nation they will have little to dread, as a people little to desire.

Extract from Marshall's life of Washington, volume 4th, page 241.

“In general the assemblies (of the states) followed the example of congress. and apportioned on the seve-

ral counties within the state, the quota to be furnished by each. This division of the state was again to be subdivided into classes, and each class was to furnish a man by contributions or taxes imposed on itself. In some instances a draft was to be used in the last resort; in others, the man was to be recruited by persons appointed for that purpose, and the class to be taxed with the sum given for his bounty."

Extract from Ramsay's life of Washington, 2d volume, page 246.

"When voluntary enlistments fell short of the proposed number, the deficiencies were, by the laws of several states, to be made up by drafts or lots from the militia. The towns in New England and the counties in the middle states, were respectively called on for a specified number of men. Such was the zeal of the people in New England, that neighbors would often club together to engage one of their number to go into the army. Maryland directed her lieutenants of counties to class all the property in their respective counties into as many equal classes as there were men wanted, and each class was by law obliged, within ten days thereafter, to furnish an able bodied recruit during the war; and in case of their neglecting or refusing to do so, the county lieutenants were authorized to procure men at their expense, at any rate not exceeding fifteen pounds in every hundred pounds worth of property classed agreeably to law. Virginia also classed her citizens and called upon the respective classes for every fifteenth man for public service. Pennsylvania concentrated the requisite power in the president, Mr. Reed, and authorized him to draw forth the resources of the state, under certain limitations, and if necessary to declare martial law over the state. The execution of these arrangements, although uncommonly vigorous, lagged far behind."



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